

Kim Chambers

FROM THE COVER

S.F. swimmer finishes rare 7-ocean feat

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"I had two choices," said Chambers, now 37. "I could accept it and be disabled or I could prove them wrong."

Last month, Chambers swam across the North Channel from Northern Ireland to Scotland, emerging from the 56-degree sea as one of the world's most elite marathon open-water swimmers. She became the sixth person to complete all seven long-distance ocean swims needed for the Oceans Seven Challenge — a grueling endurance test on seven continents considered the aquatic equivalent of the Seven Summits mountaineering challenge.

Five years ago, she took up swimming as part of the physical therapy for her leg injury, and in that time she's pushed her body to the physical and mental brink, crossing the English Channel, Catalina Channel, Cook Strait in New Zealand, the Molokai Channel in Hawaii, the Strait of Gibraltar and the Tsugaru Strait in Japan. She's battled exhaustion, hypothermia, toxic jellyfish and mental fatigue — in only a swimsuit.

152 miles total

"She was the only person who got into this sport as a form of rehabilitation," said World Open Water Swimming Association Director Steven Munatones, who created the Oceans Seven Challenge after open-water swimming became an Olympic sport in 2008. "If you add all seven up, it's 152 miles swimming in waters that range from very warm to bitterly cold."

"You're facing sharks, jellyfish, tides and currents, and you are doing it by yourself. It's unfathomable to the average layperson. It's like walking to the North Pole. You have to be one of the world's best contemporary explorers to even try this."

Chambers would be the last person to call herself a world's best anything.

"A lot of athletes paint themselves as these invincible heroes," said Chambers, in an interview at the Dolphin Club in San Francisco, where she began swimming five years ago. "I want to show people that I'm just an ordinary person — I didn't grow up swimming competitively. But if you set your mind to something and are surrounded by a community that promotes you, you can do anything."

Her feat is big news inside the Dolphin Club and the neighboring South End Rowing Club, where members stop to shake her hand and ask for her sea stories. Some made a varnished plaque of the world, with lines showing the routes of all her swims, and hung it in the Dolphin Club. In one corner of the map is a picture of Chambers, and the catchphrase she likes to shout out while in the middle of a swim, "Woo!"

Her final swim on Sept. 2 was the most dangerous of all. It took

her 13 hours and 6 minutes to cross the waters of the North Channel, through hordes of tire-size, stinging lion's mane jellyfish. Determined to finish, she ignored the searing pain on her legs and arms, and tried her best to follow her boat pilot's whistles to alert her to move left or right to avoid them. But in some places, the jellyfish were so thick, there was no place to go but through the herd. Toward the end, she was vomiting uncontrollably.

When one of her crew members jumped in to swim the last few meters with her for support, she screamed at him.

"Don't touch me!"

If an open-water swimmer is touched by another person or a boat, the swim is immediately disqualified as an "assisted" swim.

She was determined but delirious, and had trouble breathing when she finished and was lifted into the boat, where her crew poured a congratulatory shower of Guinness beer over her.

"I felt off. I felt like I was coming out of general anesthesia," she said. Her mother, Jocelyn, had to help her into a warm shower because Chambers couldn't raise her arms. Her "mum" drove her straight to the nearest hospital, where Chambers was given IV fluids and antibiotics.

Then she was flown home and admitted to California Pacific Medical Center, where doctors told her she had substantial fluid in both lungs and around her heart and liver due to the jellyfish toxicity. Four days later, doctors released her on Sept. 11 and ordered two weeks of bed rest.

"I set out to do each of these swims as a personal exploration of self; each swim changes me and allows me to be authentic," she said. "But this last swim made me finally ask the question, 'What cost?'"

From ballet to rowing

Chambers, who is single, didn't intend to push herself to one of the world's most athletic pinnacles. She didn't know any swimmers growing up on her family's sheep and cattle farm in New Zealand. She was petite with small feet and hands, and like her mother, gravitated toward ballet.

Chambers put on her first tutu at age 2 and never stopped dancing. She eventually competed nationally in floor exercises and barre routines before judges, working her way up through the Royal Academy of Dancing, so that by 17 she was qualified toward teaching.

She left home to study art history at UC Berkeley, where the only person she knew was her brother, who was a member of the varsity rowing team. When the women's crew coaches saw her long, lithe form, they recruited her to row. She lasted two years before she realized the sport was taking too much time away from her studies.



Kim Chambers spoke at the Dolphin Club earlier this month after crossing Britain's North Channel to become the sixth person to complete the Oceans Seven Challenge.



Chambers ate quick snacks every 30 minutes as she swam from Northern Ireland to Scotland on Sept. 2.

But she kept going to the gym, training for what, she wasn't quite sure. She worked out all through graduate school at Berkeley, eventually graduating in 2004 with a master's degree in information management systems. She found jobs with Oracle, then SAP, helping engineers design more intuitive user interfaces.

Then one day in 2007, she fell down the stairs on her way to work.

Life-changing accident

The trauma to her right leg created acute compartment syndrome — severe internal pressure that cut off blood supply to her muscles and nerves. Surgeons had to slice through both sides of her calf to relieve it, and use a skin graft from her side to patch the holes.

"That accident was the best thing that ever happened to me," she said. "It was the beginning of me having gratitude. Up to that point, I'd had this body that always did whatever I asked of it."

After doctors told her she'd never be able to walk on her own, she made physical therapy her full-time job. Her bosses allowed her to take two years off to work on her body, every day. She eventually walked with crutches, then took a few tentative steps on her own in modified orthopedic shoes. Then she joined the Golden Gateway Swim Club on the Embarcadero so she could swim laps in the outdoor pool.

Someone at the pool told her 80 laps was 1 mile. She had a goal. She swam a mile, and then a couple of swimmers dared her to swim with them in the bay. They invited her to the Dolphin Club, where she plunged into the frigid waters off Aquatic Park and came up grinning.

Under the water, no one could see her scars. She could move her legs. She was graceful again.

Six months later, she swam from Alcatraz to Aquatic Park. Her swimmer friends learned about her story, and kept pushing her.

In 2010, she was invited to participate in a charity relay swim from the Golden Gate Bridge to the Farallon Islands. She was a member of a six-person team that took turns swimming in one-hour shifts. Inspired by the mystery and fear of the Farallones, she gathered a team of six women to repeat the same relay swim two weeks later.

"It ignited this obsession in me," she said. "You're just this small thing on the surface, and there's this whole world happening below you. It's thrilling. Swimming is life or death."

Relay swims around Manhattan, from San Francisco to Santa Barbara, and across the English Channel followed. Then she got a little overconfident, and tried to swim the English Channel alone — just two days after the group swim.

"I barely made it halfway ... 21 miles in seven hours. I was freezing and the currents were too strong," she said. "In hindsight, it was ridiculous."

Training lessons

But rather than crumble, she learned an important lesson about training versus bravado. She began clocking 60 to 65 kilometers (37-40 miles) per week to get ready for her first solo swim across Cook Strait in her home country. It took her eight hours in waters that gave her hypothermia, and she credits the dolphins that swam above and below her for guiding her to shore.

She put on 65 pounds from her ballerina weight to make her body seaworthy. After she completed the Molokai Channel swim, it dawned on her she was positioning herself to complete the Oceans Seven Challenge.

With more swims, she got

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Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle

For more about Kim Chambers' sea adventures, read her blog: www.kimswims.com

better at tempering her initial adrenaline, slowing down and controlling her breathing. She tried to keep images of sharks out of her mind, and focus instead on getting to that sweet spot, "where I can see the bioluminescence like glitter on my arms and get in a rhythm like a trance."

A pilot boat leads the path for her to follow, and a crew boat follows to throw out water and food to Chambers every 30 minutes. They toss her a rope with options tied to it that she can just gulp in a few seconds and keep going: packets of almond butter, peach slices, energy gel, chocolates, a blend of cooked rice and almond milk, and electrolyte drinks.

A solitary pursuit

In the water, she battles monotony by thinking about the important people in her life and replaying happy moments with them. A crier by nature, Chambers weeps at the end of every swim — a mixture of gratitude, relief and pain.

There are no gold medals, no cash prizes and few sponsors in open-water swimming. Comparing times with other swimmers isn't even a possible source of satisfaction, due to the vagaries of weather and tides.

Although she doesn't wear wetsuits, Chambers does have one sponsor, the wetsuit company Blueseventy, which donates a percentage of sales to her charity of choice, Warrior Canine Connections, which provides service dogs to veterans with post-traumatic stress syndrome.

Chambers is fully recovered now, and easing back into her job in the communications department at Adobe. And she's getting numerous requests for motivational speaking engagements. Now that she's conquered swimming's most Herculean challenge, she feels a newfound sense of completion.

"For me, this was about surviving and coming back and living," she said. "I'm only now starting to understand that. But I came close to dying, so I need to sit and have some personal reflection on that. For the first time in a long time, I feel ready to rest. It's the right time to take a break."

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